



Vacaville High football team flexes its muscles against Rodriguez

By Matt Sieger | Vacaville Reporter | April 9, 2021

VACAVILLE - The night could not have started off much worse for the Vacaville High football team.

On its third play from scrimmage, a bobbled ball on a pass from quarterback Ryan Vaughan ended up in the hands of Rodriguez linebacker Marcell Struggs-Anderson, who ran it back 65 yards for a touchdown. To add insult to injury, the Mustangs converted a two-point play to make it 8-0 just a minute into the contest.

But after that, things couldn't have gone much better for the Bulldogs, who rattled off nine unanswered touchdowns for a 63-8 victory to remain undefeated in the Monticello Empire League heading into their final contest at home next Friday against rival Will C. Wood in the annual Black and Blue Bowl.

Vacaville running back Darian Leon-Guerrero had a monster game, accumulating a staggering 298 yards on the ground and five touchdowns. He averaged 16.6 yards per carry.

Leon-Guerrero could not have been more humble about his success.

"Just been trying to do my thing all season," he said, "just working together as a team. I'm very thankful for my linemen. They opened gaps for me and I just finished it."

Guerrero is not the biggest of running backs but has an amazing ability to drag defenders along with him.

"The first thing when I notice that I get touched by one person, I just start driving my legs, keep driving, keep pushing till I get to that end zone," he said.

"Darian had another very explosive night, just a really good student of the game," said Vacaville head coach Mike Papadopolous. "We made some small adjustments because

of the heavy pressure they were putting on us. He's got really good vision, very patient, just a tough competitor."

The Mustangs employed the unusual strategy of never punting on fourth down which, more often than not, gave the Bulldogs great field position. Also, the two times Rodriguez kicked off — once at the start of the game and again after their touchdown — they tried onside kicks, neither attempt succeeding.

On the second onside-kick attempt, Vacaville began its drive on its own 35-yard line. Leon-Guerrero ran for 11 yards and gained 20 yards on a screen pass to help advance the ball to the Mustang 33. Then he broke a 33-yard scamper for a touchdown. Ariel Till kicked the first of nine extra points to make it 8-7 Rodriguez with 9:41 left in the first quarter.

Vacaville then forced Rodriguez into a four and out. The Mustangs went for it on fourth-and-one from their own 19-yard line, a pass failing when Michael Otterstedt put quarterback Miles Meadows under pressure.

Vacaville took over and on fourth down from the Mustang 10-yard line, Vaughan found Tony Wiley in the end zone for a score and a 14-8 lead with 4:56 left in the quarter.

"We had the little mishap in the beginning with the bobbled ball," said Papadopolous, "but after that they settled down and played a really good football game, all facets."

The Bulldog defense was its usual stingy self, grabbing five interceptions and pushing back the Mustang running game, which had minus-18 yards in total rushing on the night.

"All year long, they've been really lights out, doing a super job," Papadopoulos said.

Late in the quarter, after taking over on the Mustang 49-yard line, Leon-Guerrero burst through a hole on the first play from scrimmage and took it all the way to the house for a 21-8 lead at the 0:51 mark.

On its next possession, Vacaville struck again. Leon-Guerrero put his team in great field position with another long run. Then Lucca Sartorio ran for four yards and then another three for a TD and a 28-8 lead early in the second quarter.

Vacaville stifled two consecutive Mustang drives, first on an interception by Sartorio and then on another by Otterstedt. Leon-Guerrero followed with a 33-yard run for another TD and a 35-8 lead.

After the kickoff, on Rodriguez's first play from scrimmage from its own 20-yard line, Timothy Plowman picked off a pass and ran it back into the end zone to increase his teams' margin to 42-8.

After stopping the Mustangs and taking over at midfield, Leon-Guerrero ran the ball 45 yards down to the Mustang five-yard line. Then he ran the ball on two successive direct snaps, the second resulting in his fourth touchdown of the night.

Just before the half ended, Plowman came up with another interception and the Bulldogs went into the locker room with a 49-8 lead.

Plowman, who said he had never had two interceptions in a game before, showed a knack for being in the right place at the right time. The junior was in man coverage on his pick-six, but on the second one the team was in deep zone coverage with the half about to end.

"I'm just glad the ball came my way," Plowman said. "I went over to help the corner on a deep ball and he just tipped it over and I got it."

On the Mustangs' opening drive of the second half, Fernando Gonzalez came up with Vacaville's fifth interception of the night and the Bulldogs took over on their own 26-yard line. On the very first play from scrimmage, Leon-Guerrero found another hole and streaked 74 yards for his fifth and final touchdown and a 55-8 lead.

Vacaville pulled most of its starters after that but the second-team players were solid the rest of the night. The game was accelerated by a running clock that both teams agreed on for the final quarter due to the large Vacaville lead.

Vacaville's final score came on four successive runs by Blake Espino, the final one for three yards with 3:59 left in the game.

Now all Bulldog eyes are on Wood for the final game of the season on Friday at Tom Zunino Stadium.

At the end of Friday night's game, Papadopolous asked his team a rhetorical question: "Do you want to just share the title or do you want to get it outright?" He urged his players to put in one more week of hard work in preparation for the big game against the Wildcats, who, along with Vanden, have one loss, while the Bulldogs are still unbeaten in Monticello Empire League play.

Papadopolous expects a tightly-fought battle.

"Another huge contest next week, looking forward to that," he said. "A very different monster we are going to see."